

Testimony presented by Marcia DuFore
On behalf of the North Central Regional Mental Health Board
Before the Housing Committee

February 23, 2016

IN OPPOSITION TO:

PROPOSED S.B. 157

Senator Winfield, Representative Osten and distinguished Senators and Representatives of the Housing Committee,

My name is Marcia DuFore. I am writing to you as Executive Director of the North Central Regional Mental Health Board (NCRMHB). Our Board's responsibility is to study the mental health needs of people in our region and assist the Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services (DMHAS) with setting priorities for improved and expanded services to meet those needs. Our constituents include people who use mental health and addiction services (young and old), their families and concerned citizens in the towns and cities where services are delivered. Many of our constituents live in poverty and are in need of deeply affordable and supportive housing.

Our concerns for this legislative session are threefold: to protect individual liberties, preserve the safety net, and promote access to the services and supports necessary for people to lead lives in recovery from mental health and addiction challenges.

First of all, we want to express our respect and gratitude to members of the General Assembly and Governor Malloy for your recognition of the importance of and ongoing investment in affordable and supportive housing for some of our most vulnerable citizens - those who are elderly AND/OR disabled.

Connecticut has the sixth highest rental costs in the nation. There is a dire shortage of affordable housing in Connecticut - especially for extremely low income renters (those making 0-30% of the area median income). Many of those extremely low income renters our constituents, people with mental health and addiction disorders who are at risk of chronic homelessness without your support. Some of them are elderly, but others are people with disabilities under 65 - a protected class under Connecticut statute and included within Connecticut's expanded definition of "elderly" since 1961. Any proposal for the expansion of state funded elderly housing that excludes people with disabilities goes their civil rights as a protected class and against 50 years of Connecticut public policy and is discriminatory.

Our state must continue to invest in deeply affordable housing. It is the right thing to do; it is cost effective; and it prevents chronic homelessness and system gridlock. However, excluding people with disabilities from access to safe, decent, and affordable housing is not the way to increase access for older people. Instead we need to continue to invest in housing opportunities for ALL people and support the expansion of support services that enable ALL tenants to live safely and use state funded housing for its intended purpose.

We are concerned about any study that seeks displacement (other than pursuant to a lease violation) and exclusion by means of reservation for a certain class of individuals as a means

to resolve conflicts between older and younger tenants in subsidized housing. Admittedly, conflicts do occur between younger and older tenants. In fact, conflicts occur in all housing complexes and neighborhoods, and they happen between individuals who are exactly the same in all respects as well as between people with obvious perceived differences. In any group, there will be some people who are easier to get along with and some who are less easy regardless of age, sex, gender identity, familial status, race, creed, national origin, disability or any other characteristic.

We agree with the further exploration of supportive services. Supportive services available to people with behavioral health concerns via DMHAS have been very effective for helping the individuals we serve live quality and productive lives in their communities. There are also supportive services available to older adults to assist them as they age in place. We must take advantage of (and enhance as necessary) services that promote healthy, livable, and inclusive communities for all Connecticut residents. If all else fails, there are legal tools to deal with problem tenants of any age who violate their lease agreements. Connecticut Legal Rights has been very successful with resolving many landlord - tenant conflicts in such circumstances without rendering their clients homeless.

Thank you for your time, attention, and interest in these matters,

Sincerely,

Marcia DuFore, Executive Director
North Central Regional Mental Health Board